



BLACK CAMERA

The Newsletter of
The Black Film Center/Archive

Fall/Winter 2000

VOL.15, NO.2

Director's Notes:

The Price of Realness: 'Bling Bling' At the Movies

In America, and increasingly, the world, youth rules. Much of their power is due to their steadily increasing disposable income, their "bling bling" chic that causes marketers to take aim. It is also comes from the inherent capacity of young people to shock their elders. By comparison to today, youth rebellions a few decades ago could mean returning home from college sporting an afro, or participating in student protests against war or racism, or taking over school administration buildings. These actions of young people sprung from a different sensibility about the world and their place in it, than what energizes the Hip Hop generation. What both have in common, however, is the absolute need to break away from what preceded them—to impose meaning on their lives on their terms. That may be a clumsy definition of the Hip Hop mantra of "keeping it real." That attitude confers membership to the initiated and excludes all others. Back in the day, some young people took it to heart when youth activist Abbie Hoffman advised, "never trust anyone over 30." Today, however, age alone, is not the gauge of who belongs. With over 40 percent of voters (i.e. the responsible taxpayers) nationwide admitting to listening to rap music some of the time, it can be argued that the appeal of Hip Hop is, to some extent, transgenerational. While a majority of adults find most rap lyrics objectionable and especially nasty toward women, notice how Hip Hop fashions and lingo are creeping up the age and class ladder. A noted editorialist for the venerable *New York Times* was caught appropriating words and phrases like "dis" and "getting jiggy wid it." It looks odd, but think of all the aging celebrities spotted wearing their caps back-

continued on page 3

"Melvin Van Peebles: Renaissance Man"

Audrey T. McCluskey, Director of Black Film Center/Archive and Associate Professor of Afro-American Studies interviewed award-winning filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles on October 24, 2000.

ATM: Last night in preparing for this interview I re-watched a few of your films: *Three Day Pass*, and one with you and your son Mario [*True Identity*], from Chip 'N Block Productions (a nice touch!). One of the things I thought about in *Three Day Pass* was how innovative it was at the time. When was it made, 1968?

MVP: 1967.

ATM: How do you explain your audacity; the grasp of your vision?

MVP: There's no explanation. It's like asking someone how do they run fast. They do what they have to do. I do film, and write, and music the way I cook. I put in what I like so in case no one else eats it, I have to eat it for the rest of the week.

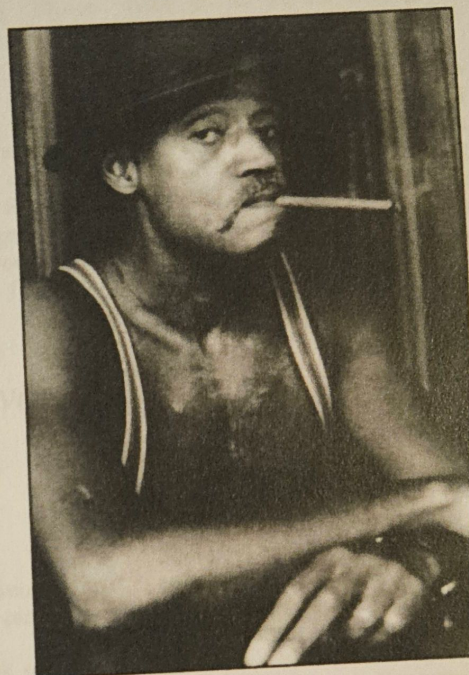
ATM: That's a great metaphor. But I'm thinking in terms of predecessors, of people that paved the way.

MVP: I didn't have any predecessors that I'm aware of. There was no conscious effort. Everything I knew was poor people going to the electric chair with sweat popping on their face, and humming spirituals. That's all I ever saw in the movies.

ATM: So you decided to be different.

MVP: No, I didn't decide to be different. I decided this is what I wanted. I said, "Man, I'm tired of this," and it turns out I seem to have a populist touch. A lot of other people were tired too, but they just hadn't done it. I think the same thing would be evident in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* [1971]. I just did what I liked and as it turned out, a lot of other people wanted to see the same thing.

continued on page 2



Melvin Van Peebles

Photo courtesy of Melvin Van Peebles

Also inside this issue:

<i>Blackness for Sale</i>	4
<i>Book Review— Lessons Through Love</i>	5
<i>Film Review— Love & Basketball</i>	6
<i>Book Review— Sidney Poitier</i>	7
<i>Film Review-Afrocentricity</i>	8
<i>BFC/A Outreach</i>	9
<i>Film Festival Highlights</i>	10
<i>In Memoriam— Beah Richards</i>	11
<i>From the Archive</i>	11

Tina Andrews

Screenwriter of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" and "Sally Hemings: An American Scandal" visited the Black Film Center/Archive November 13-14, 2000. Look for an interview with Ms. Andrews in the next *Black Camera*

"Melvin Van Peebles: Renaissance Man"

Audrey T. McCluskey, Director of Black Film Center/Archive and Associate Professor of Afro-American Studies interviewed award-winning filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles on October 24, 2000.

ATM: Last night in preparing for this interview I re-watched a few of your films: *Three Day Pass*, and one with you and your son Mario [*True Identity*], from Chip 'N Block Productions (a nice touch!). One of the things I thought about in *Three Day Pass* was how innovative it was at the time. When was it made, 1968?

MVP: 1967.

ATM: How do you explain your audacity; the grasp of your vision?

MVP: There's no explanation. It's like asking someone how do they run fast. They do what they have to do. I do film, and write, and music the way I cook. I put in what I like so in case no one else eats it, I have to eat it for the rest of the week.

ATM: That's a great metaphor. But I'm thinking in terms of predecessors, of people that paved the way.

MVP: I didn't have any predecessors that I'm aware of. There was no conscious effort. Everything I knew was poor people going to the electric chair with sweat popping on their face, and humming spirituals. That's all I ever saw in the movies.

ATM: So you decided to be different.

MVP: No, I didn't decide to be different. I decided this is what I wanted. I said, "Man, I'm tired of this," and it turns out I seem to have a populist touch. A lot of other people were tired too, but they just hadn't done it. I think the same thing would be evident in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* [1971]. I just did what I liked and as it turned out, a lot of other people wanted to see the same thing.

continued on page 2

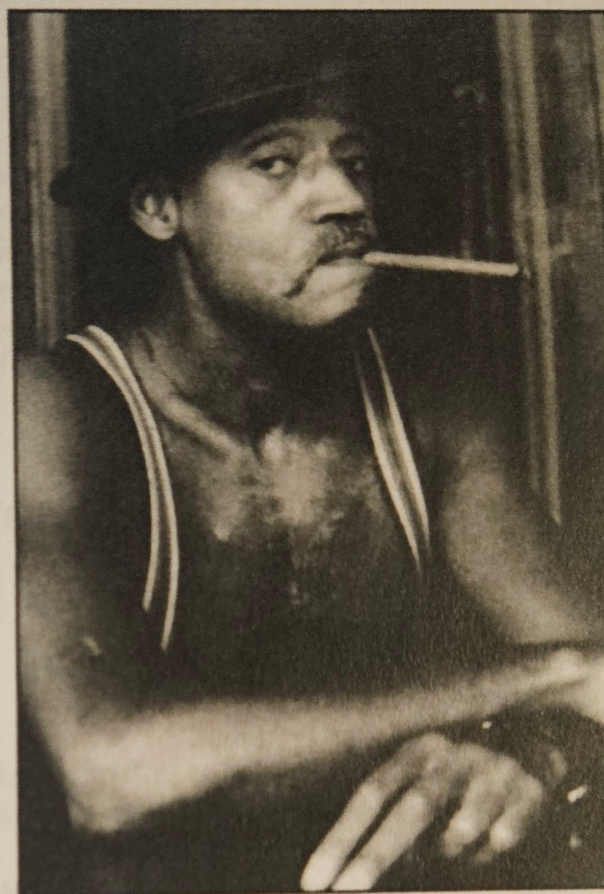


Photo courtesy of Melvin Van Peebles

Melvin Van Peebles

Also inside this issue:

<i>Blackness for Sale</i>	4
<i>Book Review— Lessons Through Love</i>	5
<i>Film Review— Love & Basketball</i>	6
<i>Book Review— Sidney Poitier</i>	7
<i>Film Review-Afrocentricity</i>	8
<i>BFC/A Outreach</i>	9
<i>Film Festival Highlights</i>	10
<i>In Memoriam— Beah Richards</i>	11
<i>From the Archive</i>	11

Tina Andrews

"Why Do Fools Fall in Love" and "Sally Hemings: An American Scandal" visited the November 13-14, 2000. Look for an interview with Ms. Andrews in the next *Black Camera*

ATM: Was it a culmination of a vision that inspired *Sweetback*?

MVP: I wouldn't call it a culmination. You should buy the book. It runs the whole thing down. There is a book called *Making Sweetback*, and that would be very interesting for you to look at.

ATM: I'll do that. You seemed to have inspired a whole group of imitators, people who have certainly tried to copy what you did. How do you feel about your legacy as a black filmmaker and filmmaker in general?

MVP: A few years ago, the Sundance Film Festival dedicated the whole retrospective show to me, because of what I did for independent film. *Sweetback*... was the largest grossing independent film that had been made up until that time that really started Hollywood's move towards independent filmmaking. One genre sprouted the blaxploitation [era], but then...I'm sort of the grandfather of not only *Blacula*, but also *The Blair Witch Project*. [My impact on these genres] was given short shrift before people recognized they were thinking like I was.

ATM: Why didn't *Sweetback*... open the door for you to resources, money, and access?

MVP: The people who usually start a revolution, end up getting trampled. I had enough other accesses to survival, not necessarily cinema—theatre, music and Wall Street that I could exist. However, *Sweetback*... if you look at it closely, is political and very unnerving and distasteful to the status quo. However, the money it made was very attractive. So they split the difference and came up with these sort of cartoonish blaxploitation.

ATM: How do you feel about your ideas being de-politicized and made into caricatures?

MVP: But in the meantime while they were doing that, it did open the opportunities for many minorities to learn the technical aspect of filmmaking which has now spread ever-so-slightly past the constraints of the blaxploitation.

ATM: Almost anyone can make a film now given the technology and the reduced costs. Do you

think, in the long run, that it is a good thing that everybody can have access but so few have a vision?

MVP: Yes, but everyone has access to a mouth too, but you don't have to listen to them. There are many people who can type at their computers, but it doesn't really make them novelists.

ATM: True. What other projects occupy you now? You have always been, in your own words, a Renaissance man, doing a lot of different things.

MVP: Not in my own words. I nod politely when people say that, which is true. But, I never put myself forward.

ATM: Well, I'm pronouncing you a Renaissance man and asking you what aspects of your various artistic endeavors are you cultivating now?

"If you have courage, that's your biggest resource of all."

MVP: More of the same. I just finished this movie that was selected for Cannes, won the Black Acapulco Film Festival. I'll be bringing that out. I'm sitting here right now working on a script from another one, and a French novel that's overdue. In February, they're doing a retrospective of my work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Meanwhile, downstairs, in the Cabaret, my orchestra is performing. So what the heck, I'm just doing the same thing I always did.

ATM: You have been recognized, perhaps, more around the world than in America. You received much acclaim in Europe. What is the most important recognition you've received?

MVP: There was a smile on the face of a couple sitting across from me on the subway the other day and he said, "Yo, bro' right on." And, I said, "Right on." That was fine for me.

ATM: They recognized you?

MVP: They do all the time. It wasn't recognition per se, it was

simply the understanding of being down folk and saying "keep on keeping on." That's cool, that's fine with me.

ATM: You received an award from the French government?

MVP: Yes, I got knighted. I got the Legion of Honor.

ATM: So, an acknowledgement from a brother on the subway saying "keep on keeping on" is equivalent to the Legion of Honor?

MVP: As far as I'm concerned that's my congregation. Those are the people I'm trying to talk to, trying to get it through. If they catch on and get it, then I'm cool.

ATM: You said you have a populist intent with your work and black people around the world know you and recognize that. But at the same time you haven't gotten your props from the

establishment.

MVP: Well, you know Christ was nothing but a carpenter in his hometown.

ATM: Do you think some of it is due to racism?

MVP: Let's say about 480,000 percent. What do you have there for a number?

ATM: However, Melvin you once said you did not deal in racism. What do you mean by that? That is a direct quote.

MVP: Did you hear me say that or did you read that I said this?

ATM: I heard you say that.

MVP: What did I say? Don't take it out of context. Repeat the whole phrase.

ATM: You said that you did not deal in racism.

MVP: That is, I do not give it any negative energy. I go on and do what I got to do. That doesn't mean it's not existent.

ATM: I know what you meant. Pioneers don't worry about the obstacles—they forge ahead. Racism can be a veil that keeps us from seeing—can't it?

MVP: It can be a veil, a crutch and no doubt it can be debilitating.

ing. But, you don't have to go along with the man's game. You're not required to...not in your heart. I never believed it.

ATM: Some of our students say they have to go along with the game because they don't have any of the resources.

MVP: Most of it is true. If you have courage, that's your biggest resource of all.

ATM: You have obviously lived by that creed. What kind of alternative resources did you have as far as the nitty-gritty aspects of filmmaking-like raising money?

MVP: I didn't. I lived on bologna sandwiches. Then I sold my car and said, "Baby, you just going have to do without flowers because I'm trying to save for the lab work. You can't get next to me just being charming. I have to take care of business."

ATM: You have a way of breaking things down to the bone. Who are some of the filmmakers whose work you like today?

MVP: Today? I don't think about it.

ATM: I'm not necessarily trying to get a name out of you, but certainly Spike Lee is one who is in the forefront. There is always controversy surrounding his work. Your work has been controversial in a similar way.

MVP: Someone called me and said that at the end of the latest Spike Lee movie [*Bamboozled*] there is a credit for [me]. Well, that's nice.

ATM: That's exactly what I mean. That's a linkage. Lee obviously recognizes it.

MVP: Well, that's a different end. Spike didn't exist until 25 years later. And that's very nice that he has that understanding of history, that's great, that's fine. Understand what you asked me. You didn't ask me who thought of me, you asked me what I thought of them.

ATM: Touché.

MVP: My original premise was to make it possible for other people to express their opinion other than in the mainstream, and he has certainly done that. Part of it is [because of] the work I have done previously—the same with the Hudlin Brothers, my own son

[Mario Van Peebles], Mattie Rich, and everybody. My early work, this pioneering effort, has made it possible. If Spike Lee and others refer to me as "the godfather of modern black cinema," then fine.

ATM: How do you assess your multi-faceted career?

MVP: Well, it beats the post office.

ATM: Actually, they have good benefits at the post office, but you might have to wear a Flak-jacket.

MVP: Exactly.

ATM: What has Melvin Van Peebles' impact been?

MVP: That's not for me to say.

ATM: I have a couple of questions not related to film but rather the political-social landscape of black America today. I know you are very concerned about that too.

MVP: I don't see really a major changing of the old guard that underlies the whole second-class citizenship. I think I have to refer to the last song in "Ain't Suppose to Die a Natural Death" [Melvin Van Peebles' Play, 1973]. It says "Every time you get hip to the old one, the man lays a new hype on you." I don't see a huge change at this moment in time. I don't consider myself either an anthropologist or sociologist. I give a very objective point-of-view. Yesterday, I still had trouble getting a cab.

ATM: You travel around the world, particularly in Europe. Do you experience a shift in consciousness when you move from one locale to another?

MVP: It really depends if they know who I am. If it's an in-group it's okay, if it's an out-group, then I get the same old treatment. Homo sapiens are very tribalistic. We, of course, in America equate that tribalism not so much to economic class as to a color of the skin. There are thousands of other things—religion for example, adds to that. As an African American, almost every other place is better. If you are under that banner...for instance, if someone thinks I'm from Cameroon or from the Antilles, then I get treated differently.

ATM: You could be like Ralph

Ellison's character "Rhinehart" [in *Invisible Man*—people see what they want to see in you.

MVP: Yes, I speak different languages, so if they assume I'm with the out-group in a particular group then I'm out. If I'm with the in-group, then I'm in. ATM: A concrete example?

MVP: Because of my sharp features and if I have on a cap, I'm assumed to be from Algeria. If I'm in Algeria, they wonder if I'm a Suni or Shite. As an American, I'm completely outside of the battle those two people are having. If I'm in France and they assume I'm not from one of their colonies, then they see me as an elite African American, and I get preferential treatment over an African.

ATM: Is race always the overlay?

MVP: No, sometimes the overlay is your education, financial status, it could be a thousand things, but we are always focused on the racial things.

ATM: In closing, I would want you to mention some of your current projects that we can look forward to in the near future.

MVP: At the moment I'm planning to release *A Belly Full* in Spring 2001. It's a French movie I just completed. I'm preparing to do a musical in France. I have a new album coming out that I completed a year ago.

ATM: Is it your composed music? Jazz, blues?

MVP: It's very hard to categorize. According to *Billboard* magazine, I was the inventor of this style now known as Rap. It has a little of that early style in it. By today's standards it would seem more inclusive than what Rap has been narrowed to. It's a little more inclusive than my original work.

AMT: When *Billboard* called you the inventor of Rap. What do you think they had in mind?

MVP: They had in mind my earlier music, some of my earlier albums on A&M Records. They just reissued them on CDs. What else can I tell you?

ATM: Enough said. Thank you.

Director's Notes

continued from page 1



Audrey T. McCluskey, Director

moves. Globalization has more than NAFTA opponents worried! That turn of events has predictably engendered a backlash from those, usually older citizens, who worry that Hip Hop threatens indigenous cultural forms of expression. While one observer may view this cultural expropriation as a positive development because it shows—once again—the universal appeal of a black aesthetic, another observer might note that these seemingly transgressive acts, especially in homogenous cultures such as Japan, are fleeting rites of passage. Nothing is at stake, nothing is transformed. The Harlem Renaissance lives!

How then, should we view the recent spate of Hip Hop inspired films? Should we expect of them anything more than vicarious entertainment? Are there tranquil truths that will set us all free lurking in the celluloid chaos of the Hip Hop film genre? Probably not. Is the fact that it often stigmatizes black youth and perpetuate mean, destructive stereotypes a reason to be upset about this energetic, creative form that marks this generation's break away from convention? Is it all about the "bling bling"? Fair or not, for black Americans, there is always more at stake than fleeting rebellion or just getting paid. The question today is whether the present youth movement driven by all things Hip Hop is really something new or just an iteration of the generational divide that has always been a part of our culture. Black youth are the driving force in films, television, music, clothes, forms of popular culture drive the Hip Hop phenomenon, and some of them are developing entrepreneurial skills and getting big bucks. But, at the dawn of a new millennium and in the midst of so much change, much seems to have remained the same. Is "bling, bling" enough for a still oppressed people? Noted filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, who forged a path for present day hip hop, offers interesting insights in my conversation with him on this issue.

An exploration of the aesthetics and impact of Hip Hop sensibilities should be illuminating. That is the focus and purpose of "Real to Reel: Urban and Hip Hop Culture in Film," our three day film festival. The schedule for the festival is listed on page 10. Check our next issue for more on this topic.

We wish to thank Chancellor Ken Gros Louis and the former College of Arts and Sciences acting dean, Russ Hanson for their continuing support of the BFC/A. They have provided funding for programming activities and equipment upgrades that helps to keep us on the path of excellence in all that we do.

-Audrey T. McCluskey, Director